

IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON THE SITUATION OF POLISH WOMEN

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1. Introduction

The current economic crisis, which was caused by the collapse of the financial system in the United States, then spread onto foreign markets, is being felt not only in the economic sphere but also in social and political life, making living conditions of people belonging to disadvantaged groups such as women, the poor and minorities, significantly degraded.

The persistently repeated thesis that the crisis is only related to the financial system makes people think that remedies which need to be found only have to stabilise the financial system. In the first reports, broader macroeconomic perspective was not included. Meanwhile, it became clear that not saying anything – as well as ignoring – about social causes of the crisis does not mean they do not exist.

As it is clear from the international organisations' reports, Polish economy has not undergone serious recession, just drag on economic and monetary issues. But what does it mean? Does these reports show any change in the living condition of an average person?

Currently, approximately 60% of Poles live from about 193 EUR per month. This amount represents an average limit of minimum subsistence. But, do the earnings of the middle class give a sense of security? Should the state not intervene in order to protect its citizens, so the 60% of Poles (!) from poverty? Or should it be left to the mercy of the public financial mechanisms and the idea of capitalist society, reducing state intervention to minimum support from financial organisations? So, on the other hand, in the name of capitalism cutting off all social programs and reducing (through media campaigns) all sense of human solidarity? By popular slogans, making people believe that in times of crisis only those may survive who deserve it. Only those who are doing well can rely on support from the state. Those who are below the line have to cope alone.

All these factors make costs of the crisis going far beyond the financial policy. Therefore, when discussing impact of the crisis, we cannot only focus on the description of the financial system, but we also have to consider the other social perspectives.

The social cost of recession in Poland, caused not only by the crisis but also by the current economic policy, which primarily results in the lack of resources, the inability to participate in social life by a significant part of the Polish population. And this not only implies poverty but also other aspects: deprivation of voice, respect, self-esteem and (in the end) vulnerability to violence.

Another social problem in Poland is high unemployment, currently amounting to 12.4%.¹ Compared to the same period in the previous year (in 2011 it was the equivalent to 11,9%) it showed an increase in the number of unemployed and in unemployment rate, as well. Statistics show that in Poland still more women are unemployed than men. It is clearly

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¹ Cf. http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/5840_1446_PLK_HTML.htm. Time of download: 6 August 2012.



one of the factors, highlighting why crisis has a greater impact on the social position of women.

Types of crisis impacts on women

In its report, the U.S. Agency for International Development distinguishes several categories of impact of the crisis on women.² To describe women's current situation in Poland, I am going to accept and use these categories as it helps in the systematisation of the phenomenon, categorizing them as the main symptoms in general relating to the situation of women in the time of crisis.

Higher unemployment among women is related to the crisis in demand for manufacturing goods.

As it was above-mentioned, in Poland more women are unemployed than men. However, because of the employment, women have a chance to take action in different areas of public life. Because of its absence, it is often difficult or even impossible to fully participate in social life. Often an unemployed or economically not active woman is economically dependent on her partner. During the crisis all cases of violence (psychological and physical) was escalated.

In addition, the average time during which women are unemployed is longer than it is in the case of men. Employers still prefer to employ men because of their higher availability and the lack of other commitments such as family or home.

However, as the employees' organisations have repeatedly stressed, the unemployment costs are much higher than the protection of jobs: lower tax revenues, lower insurance premia, the increase of social problems, etc. It is worth mentioning that the liberal state could try to pretend that these problems do not exist...until people, being in a state of despair, will come out to the streets.

In times of crisis violence against women increases

The loss or reduction of employment, rising food, fuel and goods prices, elevates the level of stress in the families, which is negatively reflected on women. Violence used against them takes various forms: aggression, humiliation, threats, economical, sexual and psychological violence. Due to the lack of assistance from the state, women are often left alone, in a situation when they feel too ashamed to seek any help. They start to blame themselves for their partners' violence and for the new, difficult situation; therefore, they cut themselves off from the society.

Heavier workload in greater number of hours, for the same wage

Due to the crisis, far more people were fired than it had previously been expected from official economic reports. Because of fear of dismissal, many workers agree to new employment's conditions. They agreed to freeze or significantly lower their wages or to alter

² Cf., *The Economic Crisis: The Impact on Women*, http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting-programs/wid.WID_FACT_SHEET_Gender_Economic_Crisis_v2.pdf (6 August 2012).

working hours. Still, employees agreed for new terms bearing the recent enormous, over 20% unemployment in mind.

Budgetary savings from the freezing of wages and the elimination of all perks also affected the public sector, where most of the employees are women. Fearing for being dismissed, many women agree to the new terms, hoping (and receiving the promise) that they will safely “survive” the times of crisis.

For the work overload mostly female workers are hired in large supermarkets complained, although, they only detain minimum wage. This is a result of the situation in which the number of clients increases all the time, but number of workers remains the same. Supermarket employees are mostly poor, having little knowledge of the law and their opportunities to complaints and other similar ways of remedies. They decide to work hard, because their minimum wage allows them to support their families. Work and labour duties should give them very important sense of stability.

Increased vulnerability to trafficking

As a consequence of losing a job in the home country and the necessity of maintaining the family, many women decide to emigrate in order to find work. Often, while they are not aware of the poor working conditions, they can become victims of human traffickers, directing them to labour camps or forcing them into prostitution.

Jobs in times of crisis are primarily directed to men

In times of crisis, most of the jobs are related to the infrastructure and the construction industry, in which men are preferred due to biological dispositions and human skills.

Bigger problems with obtaining a credit

Problems are primarily connected to women's lower earnings from which credit rating is conditioned. Women have more significant problems with getting a mortgage or cash loan which is sometimes crucial to maintain living standard (for example for the women with child). What is more, banks often require a woman to take a loan together with a man or an additional security. In this way, again, crisis makes and requires women being dependent on men.

Apart from U.S. Agency for International Development report, there are few more consequences of the crisis in Poland. Economic and labour market crises might indirectly influence fertility ratio and the number of births. Many women, especially well-off ones, were postponing the decision of having a child for years. Now, as it was written in Confederation of Polish Employers³, more women escape from reduction to maternity. Unfortunately, at the same time impoverished women might more often decide on having a child, because of growing costs of raising their family, as abortion is illegal in Poland.

³ <http://www.kpp.org.pl/> (7 August 2012).

2. Crisis as an Opportunity?

The current crisis shows that the neoliberal system, creating large economic disparities and social inequalities, does not work as it was previously expected. To eliminate inequalities which cause social discontent, state intervention is necessary. It should be remembered that the primary duty of the state is to respect and protect human rights and to ensure the welfare of its citizens.

The state must also take care of the weakest and poorest citizens, including women whose position in times of crisis is much stronger denied than men's. However, no state aid exists for women, who, due to the crisis, are in a difficult situation, regarding not only themselves but also their family and – worst of all – their children.

For a young generation, growing up in an atmosphere of hopelessness where it is normal that a woman is dependent on her husband, we instilled gender stereotypes in our children (recently so much reduced). In the name of neoliberal ideas, we also condemn them to life without perspectives, creating another generation of people benefiting from social assistance via state intervention.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and several binding international treaties clearly show that the state is obliged to create a system providing basic services and social security for its citizens. In these documents it is stressed that the most important is not only to give emergency assistance to those who are in need but also to create mechanisms that would protect citizens, and would also ensure the fulfilment of long-term economic growth. For many years non-governmental organisations, including feminist organisations emphasised the need to create an equal, accountable and democratic, national and international system, as well. Human rights and the care for sustainable (economic) development should stand in its centre. Human rights require governmental intervention in order to create the necessary conditions for the complete use of these rights by the whole society. It is worth mentioning as well as highlighting an important first generation human right (anti-discrimination), by the way, that in this sense the stimulus package cannot be discriminative, which is – it has to be stated – a reality and current danger. Discriminatory practices should be eliminated from the law: from common law to its everyday practice, as well.

Feminist organisations stress that in times of crisis the Polish government should pay special attention to guarantee health care, food and housing aid, access to free education and labour market, and most importantly, to provide the ability to protect individual human (fundamental) rights. Priority should be given to protect the injured, the weak and the excluded citizens.

A few days ago the media informed the people about the remarkable success of the authorities of Warsaw: „the next two successful evictions.” Families, due to the city authorities' current policy, will not find place in the shelter (which is eliminated) and will get only few months of social assistance, because it is too limited. The result is clear: marginalised, lonely. Are they still the citizens of our country? A country, whose citizens pay one of the highest tax rates? A country that will pay high bonuses to officials rather than to help its citizens. Or should we still pretend, that in Poland the problem of extreme poverty does not exist?

Long lasting and worsening economic situation might also cause many social and political conflicts. Economic polarisation, the increase of unemployment, collapse of financial markets and public budget might be followed by the rise of radical, conservative, right-wing attitudes. movements and parties. The rise of conservatism might promote traditional, patriarchal lifestyle, destroying hard-earned, pro equality achievements. Critics of

economic liberalism, which, by many is considered as the main source of the crisis, might easily be transferred into new gender rights problems. New, non-traditional position of women might be considered as the easiest way to eliminate the source of crisis. At the same time, as we can see it today, much more important economic issues might dominate and cause the marginalization of social and gender issues.

If we want to overcome the crisis, the economic policy has to be socially responsible. The whole society must be involved in the process of its creation. Also, the process should be more transparent and should take different voices and alternatives into consideration.

The current economic crisis should, therefore, have good effects on women. Society has to promote women's knowledge and skills. It has to promote them because as it comes from international studies, women having lower positions than men often have much greater abilities to perform the role.

Higher economic activity of women would also increase their security, allowing them to defend themselves against further crises. Women, due to the creation of the opportunity to participate in economic processes, through promotion in the labour market and among decision-makers in the financial sector, by parity on electoral lists, were given opportunity to take part in the formation, implementation and evaluation of macroeconomic policies, helping them to develop skills that might be helpful after the crisis. Policies shall address the needs of all layers and members of society and not just the most privileged ones. A system and philosophy for the sake of giving them hope that in the future it will be based on the respect of human rights, assuming the participation of many voices and will be responsible for long-term, sustainable development.